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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000176

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SUBJECT: SYRIA'S NATIONAL COUNCIL ATTEMPTS TO SURVIVE SARG
CRACKDOWN

REF: 07 DAMASCUS 1156

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary. The Syrian regime,s severe crackdown on the Damascus Declaration National Council (DDNC) has put the movement under intense pressure. It,s most prominent leaders are in prison and are facing a number of SARG restrictions on access of family and ability to talk to their lawyers. Some have serious medical illnesses which are not being helped by their prison conditions. Others were physically mistreated during the investigation phase at security service detention centers. DDNC members on the outside can take only limited steps to sustain the movement out of fear of SARG retaliation. Although the DDNC has refused to soften its stance vis--vis the regime, DDNC members admit they need some outside help to gain notoriety and potential support. The movement, however, continues to struggle with identifying the best way forward that puts the fewest people at risk. There are differing views about how helpful U.S. and European statements in the current regional atmosphere would be. Embassy,s suggestion is that we focus on specific SARG actions and issue strong statements when they occur.

BACKGROUND

12. (C) The DDNC announced its existence on December 1, 2007 (reftel). (Note: the DDNC grew out of the 2005 Damascus Declaration, a movement led by prominent opposition figures Riad Seif and Riad Turk that called for greater democratic reform in Syria.) DDNC members and other Embassy contacts report that the founding meeting as well as its inaugural announcement took the regime by surprise. The resulting government crackdown has included the arrest and detention of most of the DDNC,s most influential leaders.

STATUS OF THE PRISONERS

13. (C) There are now 13 Damascus Declaration National Council (DDNC) detainees held in Syrian prisons. They are Kamal Moel, Riad Seif, Talal Abu Dan, Walid al-Bunni, Akram al-Bunni, Ali Abdullah, Fidaa Hourani, Ahmad Tomeh, Mohammad Haj Darwish, Fayiz Sara, Mohammad Yasser al-Eitti, Jaber

Shoufi, and Marwan al-Esh. The longest detentions date from December 11, 2007. (Note: The SARG initially detained approximately 35 DDNC on December 10-11. Although most of those original detainees were eventually released, Bunni, Tomeh and Shoufi have remained in custody throughout the entire period.) Many are suffering from medical ailments, some life threatening. DDNC President Fidaa Hourani, whose father Akram was both Syrian Vice President and Speaker of the National Assembly, suffers from extreme hypertension. In February prison officials for a week refused to move her to a hospital where she could receive treatment. As Washington knows, DDNC Executive Committee Head and former MP Riad Seif has needed prostate surgery outside of Syria for some time, but his condition remains stable for the time being. In addition, writer and DDNC secretary Akram al-Bunni is suffering from a heart condition, according to his lawyer.

14. (C) In addition to intermittently denying medical care, prison officials are subjecting the prisoners to other types of pressure. First, the security services physically abused a number of the DDNC detainees during interrogations that lasted days before they were transferred to prison. Now, according to lawyers, family members and human rights activists, prison officials are recording all conversations between the prisoners and their family members and/or lawyers. Defense lawyers Sirin Khoury and Muhanad al-Hassani report that the government is also requiring lawyers to get permission from the president of the Syrian Bar Association and the government's General Prosecutor before they can visit their clients; such a requirement is illegal according to Syrian law. Consequently, Hassani, who is also President of the Syrian Human Rights Organization, says he has only been able to see Fidaa Hourani and Riad Seif. Hassani also

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said that all political prisoners, including DDNC members, are forbidden from speaking to other prisoners. To illustrate their point, prison authorities added another two years of prison time to a common criminal Maziet Khalil for speaking to DDNC detainee Fayiz Sara, according to Hassani. Finally, National Organization for Human Rights president Ammar Qurabi said that prison guards refused to let Walid al-Bunni to see his wife.

STATUS OF THE MOVEMENT

15. (C) With so many of its top members in prison the question remains can the DDNC sustain itself as a movement? Many civil society activists have said that they suspect the SARG is looking for a deal where DDNC detainees will get relatively light sentences if the detainees recant some of the DDNC's most strident positions. According to Hassani, both Seif and Hourani have rejected any sort of deal out of hand saying that, "even if they die in prison they must set an example for the next generation."

16. (C) DDNC member and moderate Islamist Fawaz Tello estimated that of the original 220 DDNC signatories about 30 to 40 are still active. They have been mostly concerned with aiding the families of the political detainees and trying to raise awareness through statements on the Damascus Declaration website. Tello conceded that any type of coordinated activity has been extremely difficult because the regime closely monitors all of their communications.

17. (C) There is also the matter of external support. Tello said that he as well as Seif and Hourani still think that statements from the USG would help their cause. Tello emphasized that the USG should directly name Syrian officials who are involved with the mistreatment of political prisoners. For instance, Tello suggested naming: GID Director Ali Mamluk, who heads the organization that inflicted physical abuse on many of the DDNC prisoners when they were picked up; or Samir al-Sheikh, who is the warden of

Adraa prison and responsible for the safety and well being of its prisoners. More importantly, Tello said that the DDNC needs more material forms of support from the U.S. However, other human rights activists outside the DDNC are less open to U.S. support. Haithem al-Maleh and Salim Kheirbek of the Human Rights Association of Syria noted that given the current regional context, USG support could diminish the credibility of the opposition in the eyes of the Syrian people.

STEPS FORWARD

18. (C) In short, DDNC members and their allies have told Post that their aim is to maintain a low profile during the coming months. In addition, Tello, Hassani and others have expressed their concern that USG support for democracy in Syria will no longer be a top priority under a new U.S. administration. Despite concerns, Tello reiterated that the DDNC will persevere, adding that the regime failed to eradicate the opposition in the past and that it will fail to completely shut down the DDNC now.

19. (C) Comment: The ongoing regime crackdown against the DDNC, as well as any other type of dissent, presents a dilemma to those working for change inside Syria. On the one hand, the DDNC needs continued international attention to keep their movement going and to have any visibility with the Syrian public. On the other hand, too much international support may play into the regime's attempts to paint the DDNC as foreign agents. Embassy's recommendation is that we direct statements at specific SARG transgressions such as its initial refusal (later withdrawn) to transfer Fidaa Hourani to a hospital. For example if Riad Seif's condition worsens, or if additional measures are taken against prisoners, Post will recommend that Washington issue a strong and directed statement and lobby like-minded allies to do the same.

CORBIN